

NENE

Nesochen sandvicensis

A close examination of the Nēnē's feet provides a clue to the uniqueness of our state bird. Unlike other geese, the Nēnē or Hawaiian Goose, is adapted to live on rugged lava flows, far from standing water. The reduction of webbing between their toes enables them to walk more easily on lava. This unusual and beautiful bird, once common on the Big Island, is now an endangered species.

DISTRIBUTION: Wild populations of Nēnē occur in upland areas on Hawai'i in the Ka'ū district, on southwest slopes of Hualalai, and on the windward side of Mauna Kea-Mauna Loa saddle. Nēnē have also been released on the upper slopes of Haleakalā on Maui.

DESCRIPTION: The Nēnē is 22 to 26 inches in length. The face, head and nape of the neck are black. The feathers of the cheek are yellow-buff; the buff-colored feathers on the neck create a furrowed pattern. Both sexes are similar and are gray-brown above with lighter barred underparts. The feet and bill are black.

VOICE: Calls given in flight resemble those of the related Canada Goose. Other calls are muted and tend to resemble the "moo" of a cow.

NESTING: During the breeding season, extending from October through February, a homing instinct often brings the Nēnē to a nest site occupied in the previous year. These down-lined nests are usually well-concealed in upland areas of sparse vegetation, surrounded by rugged lava flows. The average clutch size is four eggs.

DIET: Seeds of grasses and herbs as well as leaves, buds, flowers, and fruits of various plants make up the Nēnē's vegetarian diet.

CONSERVATION NOTE: Fossil records suggest that the Hawaiian Goose once dwelled on all of the main islands. Early written accounts reveal that during the latter part of the eighteenth century, there may have been as many as 25,000 Nēnē on the Big Island. Less than 200 years later, in 1951, the Nēnē population had dropped to an estimated 30 birds. Hunting, habitat modification, frightening birds from their nests, and the effects of introduced plants and animals, particularly the predatory mongoose, all contributed to the Nēnē's decline.

Since then, a captive propagation and release program has helped to increase the Nēnē's population. Approximately 500 Nēnē are estimated to exist in the wild. However, recent survey evidence suggests that the wild populations cannot be sustained without additions from the captive flock. The alteration of preferred lowland habitat and the pressures of predation may be major factors in their population decline. Further research is needed to shed light on the reasons for their reproductive failure and to help ensure the survival of self-sustaining wild populations of Hawai'i's state bird.



A flock of Nēnē on Maui.

—Photo by Betsy Gagne